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King's Slayer Gets 99 Years

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (UPI) — Barring escape or unlikely legal maneuvers, the admitted slayer of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. never again will be a free man. But mystery still surrounds James Earl Ray's part in the assassination.

In an instant trial yesterday, the 41-year-old escaped convict pleaded guilty to the April 4, 1968, killing of King in Memphis and was sentenced to 99 years in prison.

Ray would be eligible for parole in 30 years, at the age of 71, but should he be released, he could be required to serve the eight years remaining on a 16-year term at the Missouri State Prison, plus any additional time he may be given for escaping from the prison.

Ray arose during his 2½-hour trial to tell Judge W. Preston Battle that he disagreed with various "theories" that there was no conspiracy to kill King. He did not elaborate.

Probe Is Still Open

Battle said the prosecution had not established there was a conspiracy, but "if there was a conspiracy, no member of such a conspiracy can ever live in peace or lie down to pleasant dreams because there is no statute of limitations in capital cases in this state."

The FBI in Washington said that "the investigation into the original allegations of a conspiracy is still open."

The original FBI warrant charged Eric Starvo Galt, a Ray alias, and a man alleged to be "his brother" with conspiring to kill King. Ray's three brothers apparently never were seriously involved in the investigation.

Prosecutor Phil Canale said during the trial, "There have been rumors that James Earl Ray was a hired dupe for others to kill Martin Luther King. We have no evidence that any conspiracy was involved."

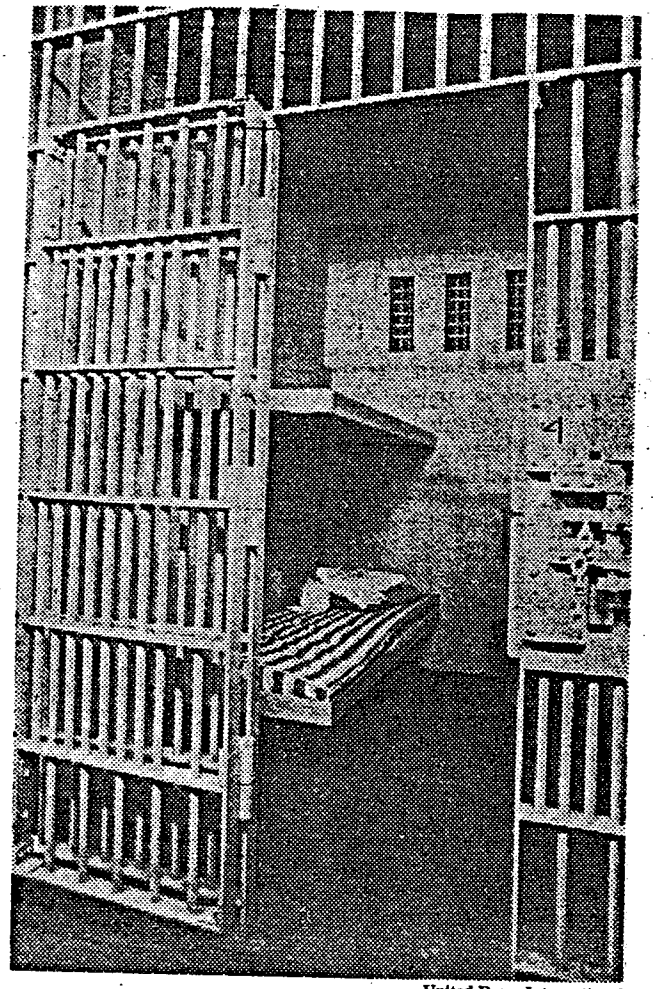
Ray's attorney, Percy Foreman, said, "It took me a month to convince myself of this fact, what the attorney general of the United States (Ramsey Clark) and J. Edgar Hoover of the FBI said last year, that there was not a conspiracy."

King's widow, Coretta, and the man who succeeded him as head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Rev. Ralph David Abernathy, said in Atlanta they did not believe the slaying was a one-man crime.

"This plea of guilty cannot be allowed to close the case, to end the search for the many fingers which helped pull the trigger," Mrs. King said. Abernathy said his belief in the "conspiracy has been strengthened by the courageous admission of James Earl Ray . . . and the SCLC is committed to remain alert and vigilant until justice is meted out to all the perpetrators."

Many Negro leaders in the South also were skeptical of the quick trial and sentencing of Ray.

"I believe the majority of the Negro people expected a cover-up in this case," said Dr. John Cashin, chairman of the predominantly Negro National Democratic Party of Alabama.



—United Press International

This is the Tennessee State Prison maximum security cell which will be occupied by James Earl Ray.

To Have Cell No. 4

Ray will serve his time in the Tennessee State Prison at Nashville, where he will be lodged in cell No. 4, a 6-by-9-foot room containing a bunk and a combination sink and commode.

Battle said there was little point in the state seeking the death penalty for Ray because the trend in the state and the nation is "in the direction of doing away with capital punishment altogether."

Mrs. King said she also would have opposed a death sentence. "The death penalty for the man who pleaded guilty to the crime would be contrary to the deeply held moral and religious convictions of my husband," she said.

The jury, which included two Negroes, heard five witnesses present the state's case against Ray. A jury trial is required in Tennessee in all cases involving capital punishment.

No defense testimony was offered and conviction came on a show of hands by jurors. The jury, by prearrangement, set the sentence at 99 years.

"I feel the prosecuting attorney had an ironclad case against Ray and if it had gone to trial he certainly would have been found guilty," said Juror Joe Stovall Jr.

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